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®

- 6 **The Robbery** / Gregory McDonald
- 15 **Two of a Kind** / Jean Darling
- 28 **Instant Replay** / Jon L. Breen
- 38 **In Love with Death** / Isak Romun
- 52 **The Decisive Moment** / Jeffry Scott
- 61 **Labor Relations** / D. L. Sproule
- 66 **Outside the Law** / Anna Clarke
- 75 **The Stranger at the Crossroads** / James Powell
- 95 **The Ghost of Claudia McKenny** / Jack Ritchie
- 101 **A Piece of Cake** / Donald Olson
- 114 **The Wrath of Zeus** / Margaret Yorke
- 121 **The Ehrengraf Nostrum** / Lawrence Block
- 134 **A Secret Place** / Don Gilbert
- 142 **The Vanished Steamboat** / Edward D. Hoch

- 87 **Mystery Newsletter** / R. E. Porter & Chris Steinbrunner
- 93 **The Jury Box** / Allen J. Hubin

a NEW short story by

JACK RITCHIE

The housesitter visibly occupied the premises to discourage break-ins and vandalism. He did not, he explained, do windows . . .

THE GHOST OF CLAUDIA McKENNY

by JACK RITCHIE

I am a professional housesitter, and this promised to be my biggest job.

Usually I deal directly with the home owners themselves. However, in this case my negotiations were with the representative, Mr. Howell.

He took me on a tour of the huge McKenny house. "Do you believe in ghosts?"

Naturally I blinked at the question. "No."

He nodded approvingly. "Good. You've got a sensible head on your shoulders. In 1829, Claudia McKenny was to be married in this very house. But on the morning of the wedding, her intended did not make an appearance. It has been claimed that she died of a broken heart and that her ghost has glided consistently about the grounds ever since, searching for her missing lover—which seems rather futile to me, since he was last seen in Cincinnati."

Howell then proceeded to get down to the nitty-gritty of the situation. "The present members of the McKenny family are now in Europe and have been there for nearly two years. Neither I nor apparently they have any idea of when they will return. When they left, they dismissed all of their servants, leaving only a caretaker on the premises. He quit last week."

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I supplied the expected question. "Why?"

Howell smiled faintly. "He maintained that he saw the ghost of Claudia McKenny, and apparently it disturbed him."

I absorbed that without damage and moved on to another point. "I am a housesitter. In short, I visibly occupy the premises to discourage break-ins and vandalism. I do not, to put it another way, do windows."

He was aware of that. "I have engaged a firm which specializes in servicing estates at regular monthly intervals. You will not have to lift a finger."

I have been a housesitter for nearly three years.

Previous to that, I was a contented and newly appointed assistant professor of Latin at our state university. However, the general economic picture forced some budgetary cuts in my department, and since I was the most junior member I became a casualty.

There doesn't seem to be much of a call for assistant professors of Latin these days, and as time passed so did my unemployment benefits and I was faced with virtual starvation and certain eviction from my apartment.

It was at this point that a professor with whom I was on good terms was about to set upon his sabbatical leave. Since he would be away for one year, he was chary about leaving his home unoccupied and equally uneasy about renting it to absolute strangers.

He approached me and offered me the use of his house, plus a nominal sum, if I would establish residence there while he was away. I eagerly jumped at the opportunity.

I spent a most pleasant year in his house, during which time I came to a decision. Until such time as the university would be able to re-employ me, I would adopt a new profession. Housesitting.

I began my new career in the university community, housesitting for faculty members off on weekends or vacations, but as time went by and my reputation for honesty and dependableness increased, I expanded my horizons and sat a variety of homes all about the city. The McKenny residence was my first venture into the countryside.

Howell paused in front of one of the family portraits on the wall. "That's Claudia McKenny."

I studied her likeness. A fairly good-looking woman of twenty or so, but the artist had caught, or inadvertently put, something in her eyes that made one wonder whether there was not some justification for fleeing to Cincinnati.

We left the house and examined the grounds, eventually reaching a line of garages under what appeared to have been servants' quarters. Howell opened one of the garage doors and I saw a collection of Lincolns, Cadillacs, and one orange, somewhat battered Volkswagen.

"You have the use of the Volkswagen," Howell said.

I didn't argue the point. It was certainly better than having to use the bicycle leaning against the wall.

After Howell left, I went back to the main house and chose one of the smaller bedrooms on an upper floor as my headquarters and unpacked my two suitcases.

Usually on my first night in a new place, I experience insomnia, and that night was no exception. At eleven-thirty I got out of bed and went to the window.

The night was moonlit and misty—really rather beautiful. I stood there, admiring the vista, when a movement at the edge of a line of trees caught my eye.

What could it be? I wondered. Some animal lurking about? A deer, perhaps? One could logically expect something like that out here in the country, couldn't one?

In the distance I could hear a farm dog howling. Or at least I thought it was a farm dog. I am somewhat city-oriented and not a connoisseur of howling.

I saw the movement again. Not in the same spot, but farther down the line of trees. Evidently, whatever it was was making its way to the rear of the grounds and would appear in the small patch of open ground in a moment or two.

I watched the shadowy progress, expecting to see a deer.

It was not a deer.

It was the figure of a woman in a long dress and she glided through the shin-high ground fog and into the shadows again.

I took a deep breath of reason. Obviously it was just someone cutting across the grounds. Trespassing. Someone in a long dress. At eleven-thirty at night. Going someplace.

I quickly adjusted the blinds, shutting out the night, and went back to bed.

I lay there trying not to think of what I was thinking. All I had seen was a perfectly normal *human* being, in a long dress, gliding across the lawn.

Not *gliding*. *Walking*. Yes, definitely *walking*.

Toward morning I finally fell asleep . . .

After a late breakfast, I found myself strolling the grounds and accidentally found myself at the spot where I had seen the woman walking across the lawn.

I found no trace of footprints, but then one really couldn't expect to find footprints on the grass.

I decided to go to the nearest town to supplement my meager supply of groceries and went to the garage for the Volkswagen. When I pushed open the overhead doors, I paused and frowned. There was something different here. But what was it? It took me a few moments to realize what it was.

The bicycle was missing.

I sighed heavily. I really should have locked the garage door before I went to bed. Someone—probably one of the local juvenile delinquents—had taken advantage of the night to steal the bike.

I would have to report the theft to the authorities, of course, but I didn't remember the bicycle's license-plate number, or even if it had one. Nor was I at all sure I could describe the bike. It was blueish, I thought. Possibly green. I *did* remember that it had one of those wire baskets in front of the handlebars.

I drove to a small town three miles down the road and located the office of the county sheriff. He expressed no optimism that the bicycle could be recovered, especially since my description seemed to lack specifics, but he promised to do his best.

When I returned to the McKenny garage, I stared.

The bicycle was now back in place, leaning against the wall. Evidently the thief—after a bit of joy riding—had decided to return it.

I was satisfied with that explanation until something occurred to me. How had the bicycle thief managed to put the bike back into the garage? I distinctly remembered that I had locked all of the doors before I went to town.

I was still pondering that when I heard a squeak from one of the floor-boards overhead. Was the thief upstairs in the servants' quarters at this very moment?

I pulled down the garage door again, but this time from the inside. He would think I had left. I took up a stand behind one of the Cadillacs and waited.

After five minutes, I heard the squeak again and it seemed to be making its way to a door at the head of the stairway.

The doorknob turned and the bicycle thief—

I blinked. Bicycle thiefess?

She had raven hair, was perhaps in her middle twenties, and wore jeans. She also had violet eyes.

She descended the stairs and went to the bike. Was she about to steal it again?

I leaped out of hiding. "Ah ha!" I said fiercely.

She was startled, of course, but when she saw it was me, she seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. "Oh, it's only you. I thought you'd gone back to the house."

"Of course it's only me," I said indignantly. "I see that you're about to steal the bicycle again."

She glanced at it. "It's *my* bike!"

I smiled tightly. "Then what is *your* bike doing in this locked garage?"

She thought about it and then shrugged. "I guess I might as well start from the beginning. You see, I have this Master's degree in English."

Automatically I topped that. "I have a Ph.D."

"Golly," she said. "How terrific for you." She studied me. "Well, anyway, there I had my Master's, but there were no teaching openings. So I took a job here as a maid—temporarily, I kept hoping. I worked about six months, and then the McKennys decided to close down the place and go to Europe. They fired everybody and hired a caretaker.

"I moved back to town, but after a while I ran out of unemployment compensation and got evicted from my apartment. So there I was on the streets with practically nothing but my bicycle.

"So I decided that since nobody was really living here but the caretaker, and he lived in the main house, why couldn't I just sneak back here and live in the servants' quarters until things in the job market got better. I knew where I could find the keys and I wasn't harming anyone."

She indicated the bike. "I use it to get to town. I have a part-time job at the library. It pays for my groceries, but not much more."

I smiled grimly. "You managed to frighten off the caretaker, didn't you?"

"I didn't mean to. I did my best to stay out of sight and walked around the grounds only after dark. But I guess he saw me and assumed it was the McKenny ghost."

"Of course he would. Especially if you wore a long dress and glided across the lawn."

"Long dress? Oh, you mean you saw me last night? No, that was

a raincoat. It was drizzling, you remember, and I don't have a raincoat of my own. So I used one left behind by one of the servants. It isn't my size and so I suppose it drags a little."

She sighed. "What are you going to do now? Call the police?"

I thought about that and finally cleared my throat. "Well, maybe we could draw some sort of an imaginary line between the main house and the garages. You stay on your side and I'll stay on mine."

Actually, the imaginary line didn't work out too well. There were numerous infractions as the weeks passed. On both sides.

In August, I got a letter from the university informing me that there was once again an opening in the Latin department. I hesitated until I learned that they also had a job for someone with a Master's in English.

Marianne and I reported for work hand in hand, so to speak.

"Q"

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